

11. September 2022

## God's wrath and compassion

Ex 32:7-11,13-14

*Yahweh then said to Moses, 'Go down at once, for your people whom you brought here from Egypt have become corrupt. They have quickly left the way which I ordered them to follow. They have cast themselves a metal calf, worshipped it and offered sacrifice to it, shouting, "Israel, here is your God who brought you here from Egypt!" Yahweh then said to Moses, 'I know these people; I know how obstinate they are! So leave me now, so that my anger can blaze at them and I can put an end to them! I shall make a great nation out of you instead.' Moses tried to pacify Yahweh his God. 'Yahweh,' he said, 'why should your anger blaze at your people, whom you have brought out of Egypt by your great power and mighty hand? Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to whom you swore by your very self and made this promise: "I shall make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and this whole country of which I have spoken, I shall give to your descendants, and it will be their heritage for ever." Yahweh then relented over the disaster which he had intended to inflict on his people.*

In the first instance, we look to the Lord, whose wrath has been kindled by the behavior of the People of Israel. They are his people; they are his children, the Israelites, to whom he has given so many signs of his fatherly love. Unlike the other peoples, who remained ignorant, confusing idols with God, the true God had been revealed to the people of Israel. However, they quickly abandoned their ways and became spiritually blind. Thus God's wrath was kindled and his jealousy was aroused...

What does this mean?

In speaking of God's wrath, it expresses His holiness and His righteousness, which cannot tolerate ungodliness. It is wrath against sin, which enslaves man, disfigures the image of God in him and allows demons to gain influence over him. The holiness of God - in which there is no shadow - necessarily rejects the darkness of sin and error. Just as on the way to eternity our soul has to be purified from sin and its consequences, so God's holy people could not simply relapse into the darkness of ignorance without arousing the Lord's wrath.

The expression of the "jealousy of God" implies that the love between God and man is like conjugal love, which, by its very essence, cannot tolerate the coexistence of a relationship of the same kind with a third person. Therefore, every idolatry is a spiritual adultery; a breaking of the Covenant with God.

But then the Lord turns to Moses, and Moses appeases his anger... We can see that this is precisely what the Lord wants. He wants to forgive his people! He wants Moses to remind him of his immense love for Israel! It is not that God has forgotten, nor was He dominated by anger to the point of not remembering His mercy. No! It is that God wants to include man in His plan of salvation. Many passages of Scripture help us understand this, and also the life of the Church testifies to it.

Therefore, we Catholics must always be aware that even those situations which, from the human point of view, seem to have no way out and which rightly provoke God's wrath, can be turned around.

How rightly could God's wrath have been kindled when His Son was being nailed to the cross! Yet He took that wrath upon Himself, so to speak, so that the Cross became a sign of God's mercy. From the *Cross, Jesus interceded for the whole of humanity and uttered the unforgettable words: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing"* (Lk 23:34).

To acquire the accurate image of God, one must keep in mind both his justice and his mercy, and the proper relationship between the two. One can easily fall into one of two extremes: On the one hand, overemphasizing God's justice and God's wrath when proclaiming the gospel; on the other hand, which is what happens most often today, hastily claiming God's mercy, as if his wrath and justice did not really exist.

In the first extreme, the proclamation takes on an unfruitful severity and harshness; in the second, it takes away the profound seriousness of faith and of following of Christ.

Thus, as today's biblical account shows us, the appropriate relationship between justice and mercy is part of the proclamation. It is necessary to create awareness of the abysmal vileness and depravity of sin. Then mercy will shine with greater intensity, and will awaken in our heart gratitude and adoration of God.

The last sentence of the reading makes it clear to us what the attitude of mercy is: "*Yahweh then relented over the disaster which he had intended to inflict on his people.*" This is what God wants: to forgive us so that we may live.

Let us be careful that today's idols do not confuse us and arouse God's wrath. Today, we Christians have a greater knowledge of God than the Israelites did in the time of the Old Covenant. Therefore, if we fall back into pagan practices at this time, it would be even more serious than it was before the light of the Lord shone in the world.

Let us all be vigilant, for evil spirits are trying to deceive us. Let us hold fast to the authentic doctrine of the Church, which explains Sacred Scripture to us, interpreting it in the light of the Holy Spirit! Let us pray also for the purification and enlightenment of our Holy Church, for She must remain the bulwark against all errors.